

Indian Ragas – American Jazz

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Sometimes you can do things that are spontaneous when you aren't physically trying to compose, said American jazz saxophonist Ravi Coltrane, chatting with students at the Ravi Shankar Institute of Music and Performing Arts in New Delhi, recently.

Moments later, Coltrane was in a jam session, or *jugalbandi*, cross-legged on the floor, trading musical riffs on his clarinet with shenai playing brothers Sanjeev and Ashwini Shankar. Their teacher, India's musical maestro Ravi Shankar, clapped his hands, patted his thigh to the beat, and sang out snatches of tunes.

The Indian sitar master and the 40-year-old American musician who was named after him were fortunate to have music to express their feelings, because several times during the afternoon each was struck speechless with emotion over their first meeting in India.

Shankar had met Coltrane's father, John, one of America's jazz giants, in New York in the 1960s. The elder Coltrane "was so interested in our expressing through our music a peaceful state of mind and the spontaneous improvisation and all the system of ragas and how we do it," Shankar told his master class.

Shankar said he spent several days with John Coltrane, sharing as much information as he could. They had planned to meet again, but John Coltrane died suddenly in 1967.

"Anyway the love and the friendship that we had made him choose my name and...call him Ravi, and that has made me so happy," Shankar said, placing his hand over his heart as he looked up into the face of John Coltrane's son, now an

acclaimed jazz musician and composer in his own right.

"Today, we welcome you, Ravi," said Shankar. "I am also very curious to hear and learn more about jazz." He reached out with an American handshake for his visitor, who offered an Indian *namaste*.

The two Ravis had met before, and also shared a New York City stage in 1998, when the younger Coltrane performed with his mother, Alice Coltrane, a rare female jazz musician who plays the organ, piano and harp. She now arranges and records music for Hindu meditation groups.

But this was Ravi Coltrane's first visit to India and the meeting with Shankar was, "of course, the highlight."

"My whole life I've had this name, known this name, known and heard his music," said Coltrane. "My father had such great admiration for...his music and love for him, so great that he would name his second child after him.

"I have one child, William. I know the agony a parent can go through choosing a child's name," Coltrane said. "I can relate to and connect with what my father must have been expressing...by naming me Ravi, so I have to thank you for that."

Coltrane said he was not always grateful to be called Ravi. Born in New York in 1965, he grew up in California, where, "it was unusual having a non-Western name. I was a very shy person. No one could pronounce my name correctly. I wanted to be like everyone else. I was thinking of changing my name to Robert."

At 10 or 11, Coltrane said, he was "not aware that the world is very big, and having something different and unique is a positive thing." When he was a little older, a girl commented, "It's such a beautiful name."

After that, it was fine to be named Ravi!

Coltrane was just two when his father died, and therefore, has only theories—not unique insight—about what his father was thinking when he fused Indian and African musical expressions into American jazz.

Spiritual Awakening

"Around 1957 is when he had this period of awakening as he called it, spiritual awakening, where he was trying to improve his life, add things to his life and himself to make himself a broader person, maybe a more universal person," said Coltrane.

Many jazz musicians at the time were trying to find new influences and inspiration. "It's easy to see differences in John Coltrane's music from 1957 to '60, not just developing as a stronger saxophonist, but the music overall was changing and it changed drastically over a period of time," said Ravi Coltrane.

In his autobiography *Ragamala*, Shankar recalls that a mutual friend had been telling him about John Coltrane for several years, "how he was fascinated by India, had become a fan of mine, and had all my records....When Coltrane came to me he looked different from his contemporaries: so clean, well mannered and humble."

John Coltrane recorded "My Favorite Things" in the fall of 1960, probably the first example of his "doing something with a primary rhythmic structure," said his son. At 13 minutes, it may be the longest piece the senior Coltrane had recorded at that time. "I think it was definitely done to sort of emulate the Indian music and African music that he was hearing," Ravi Coltrane said. In the piece, the bass does not move, harmonically

Ravi Shankar Welcomes Ravi Coltrane

speaking. The younger Coltrane feels it emulates the sound of the Indian stringed instrument, the tamboura or drone, behind and underneath the jazz improvisations.

Shankar agreed that John Coltrane was very interested in the tamboura, which underlies much Indian music, acting “like a tonic,” said the maestro.

John Coltrane “could see that in the world there was music that could relate to higher ideas, besides just sounding good and you enjoying it,” his son said. “He was specifically trying to do that in 1964, trying to imply symbolic meaning to his music. I’m sure this is something he could see and hear in Indian music, and in music from other cultures as well. The bottom line is he was trying to find something universal.”

“I’m a little nervous, with the master here,” Coltrane said, glancing toward Shankar as he picked up his clarinet, an instrument he started playing at the age of 12. Four years later, when his older brother was killed in a car accident, Coltrane stopped playing, and didn’t start again until he was 21.

In his youth, Coltrane said, he was interested in American pop and thought his father’s jazz “was cool music, but it wasn’t anything that really had gotten inside me.” As he worked through his grief, he kept being asked about his father’s music and investigated it on a technical level, as a student. “I started finally hearing the music in a different way. When I went to the music for one reason, I got this other thing from it,” Coltrane said. “I thought about it years later and realized it wasn’t accidental that I finally made this connection with this music at that time in my life.”

Wrapped up in jazz, Coltrane says, is the

idea of freedom, “having the ability to assert your own sense of self, your own ideas, your own style. That’s what makes Indian music exciting, forms of American music exciting, the individual expression, something that can be created in real time.”

Jazz is regarded as an indigenous American music form, but Coltrane notes that some of the conditions that produced it are not “part of the American ideal.”

“A lot of the creators of the music were black American men who didn’t have the easiest lives,” he said. “They were treated like second-class citizens and the music came out despite that type of treatment. Oppression like that happens in every part of the world, not just in those days but even today, and people find ways to rise above it in art and music. I’m very proud of the fact that the music did come from the United States and was created by a handful of very talented people. But it’s no longer a specific thing that comes from a specific place.” □

Ravi Shankar listens as Ravi Coltrane plays clarinet at the Ravi Shankar Institute of Music and Performing Arts in New Delhi.





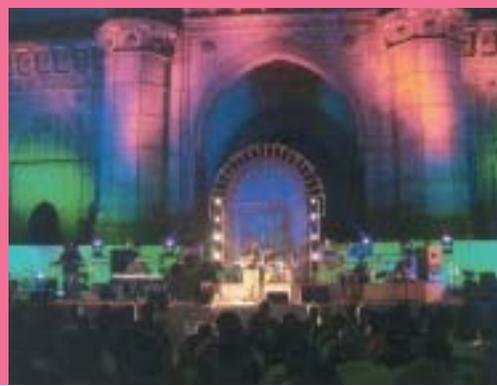
Courtesy Times of India

American Jazzmen

Ravi Coltrane's visit was part of the 2005 India Jazz and Heritage Tour with other American jazz legends, vocalist Al Jarreau, guitarist Earl Klugh and bass player George Duke. The tour aimed to emphasize shared U.S.-India concerns about the spread of HIV/AIDS and other social issues and was sponsored by the U.S. State Department, Black Entertainment Television, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and MTV-India.

"Until eight weeks ago, I was unaware of the extent of the AIDS epidemic in India. I didn't think it was as pervasive here," said Duke, who provided backup for Jarreau as he performed for child rag pickers and street dwellers in Mumbai. The children at a shelter run by the Committed Community Development Trust laughed with delight as Jarreau sang "Ba, Ba, Bye," making the word move like a wave with crests and troughs. On the birthday of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., the jazzmen were serenaded with the American civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome," sung by children supported by a nongovernmental organization called Stop Trafficking and Oppression of Women and Children. The children also performed an excerpt from Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama, *Chandalika*, depicting the trauma of a low-caste girl facing discrimination.

"Jazz was born from the American people's struggle to conquer prejudice and stigma in our society," then-Secretary of State Colin Powell said as he inaugurated the jazz tour that began in December 2004. "The struggle continues to this day....No one should be stigmatized or looked down upon." □



Courtesy BET Jazz



Combat AIDS Prejudice

Above: Al Jarreau and George Duke get into the mood at the shelter run by Committed Community Development Trust in Mumbai.

Far left: India Jazz and Heritage Tour 2005 concert at the Gateway of India in Mumbai.

Left: Earl Klugh

Dipesh Satapathy contributed to these articles.